

MIAMI HERALD

21 July 1983

Nicaraguan peace bid is positive but falls short of goal, U.S. says

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WASHINGTON — Departing from its normally harsh rhetoric toward Nicaragua, the Reagan Administration on Wednesday cautiously welcomed as a "positive step" an offer by the Managua government for regional negotiations to achieve peace in Central America.

A State Department spokesman said, however, that the Nicaraguan proposals issued Tuesday still fell short of answering all U.S. concerns toward a substantial reduction of tensions in the region.

Privately, several administration officials said that despite the encouraging tone of Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega's speech, the Sandinista government would have to send more "concrete signals" to Washington to elicit a more positive response.

Congressional leaders, particularly critics of President Reagan's Central American policies, effusively backed the Nicaraguan proposals and urged the President to rescind the recent order that dispatched a U.S. Navy battle group to the region.

In discussing the Nicaraguan peace plan, State Department spokesman John Hughes said that

the United States "welcomes any sincere and verifiable proposal to lessen the tensions in Central America."

Referring to Ortega, coordinator of the Nicaraguan junta, he said, "Taking [Ortega] at his word, we believe the Nicaraguan proposal is a positive step, in that it acknowledges the regional nature of the problem and the need to address external support for insurgencies and for terrorist groups."

Hughes added, however, that the Nicaraguan offer "still contains a number of serious shortcomings."

As an example, he noted that the proposal "seeks to put the insurgents in El Salvador on the same level as the democratically elected government."

Hughes said the United States also was disappointed in that the Nicaraguan declaration, issued on the anniversary of the Sandinista victory over former President Anastasio Somoza, "did not deal with Nicaragua's military buildup" and contained "no clearly articulated provisions for effective verification."

He indicated nonetheless that Washington would not reject the Sandinista peace proposal, and expressed the hope instead that it will

be "considered, refined and expanded as necessary" at a meeting of the regional Contadora Group later in the month.

The Managua proposal appeared to reverse the Sandinistas' previous position that crises in the region should be dealt with essentially through bilateral talks. It also appeared to respond to the call for diplomatic initiatives that was issued last weekend by the presidents of Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Panama — the Contadora nations.

Hughes, asked if the United States would cancel a planned Central American military exercise as a gesture to the Sandinistas, replied: "I don't know that any consideration is being given to that."

A critic of U.S. policy in the area, Rep. Michael Barnes (D., Md.), chairman of the House subcommittee on Western Hemisphere affairs, urged the President to accept Nicaragua's proposal and scrap naval exercises involving an eight-ship task group en route to the Pacific coast of Central America as a demonstration of "U.S. resolve."

Barnes also urged the House to vote next week to halt CIA support for anti-Sandinista rebels as another gesture to the Nicaraguan gov-

ernment.

Privately, a White House official said the administration was "leery" of the Managua position, saying it "appears to be a public relations ploy to play up to the Contadora Group, and [to] entice our Congress to vote to terminate covert [CIA] aid."

For the Reagan Administration "to get really excited" about the Nicaraguan plan, the official said, the Sandinistas would have to take "some rather concrete actions to satisfy American concerns."

Asked what kind of additional signals might be required, the official said Washington "probably" would accept a Sandinista announcement of a reduction by half of Cuban military advisers now in the country.